

The Ethiopian SORT IT Course

Neglected Tropical Diseases: responding to calls for action from the front lines in Ethiopia

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“All nations should become consumers and producers of research knowledge and research need to be strengthened, close to the supply of, and demand for health services.”

This was one of the key messages of the 2013 World Health Report on ‘Research for Universal Health Coverage’[1]. This supplement of the Journal of Infection in Developing Countries (JIDC) provides timely, actionable evidence generated by health workers who are on the front lines tackling Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) in Ethiopia. The work responds to an unanimous desire to hasten progress towards NTD elimination, expressed by health workers, scientists and policy makers who came together in the city of Gondar, Ethiopia through the Structured Operational Research and Training Initiative (SORT IT) [2].

SORT IT is a global partnership-based initiative coordinated by TDR, the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases hosted at the World Health Organisation, and implemented with various partners [3]. It aims to make countries “data rich, information rich and action rich” thereby improving health care delivery and outcomes [4]. Now reaching 93 countries with about 1000 research projects and 70% impact on policy and or practice, the SORT IT initiative has proven to be effective and output-oriented [5].

Achieving the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including the control and elimination of NTDs (SDG 3.3) will require robust programme data to guide strategies that improve access

to care and equity, reduce attrition and curb mortality[6]. SORT IT can provide impetus in this direction, by enhancing the availability of high quality, timely and disaggregated data for informed decision making. The expected impact is strengthened health systems, better programme performance and improved public health. The operational research evidence generated from such “real life” settings is a form of public accountability and closely tied to achieving Universal Health Coverage [7].

This issue of JIDC brings together an important collection of SORT IT papers on themes such as visceral leishmaniasis, scabies, schistosomiasis, soil transmitted helminths, echinococcus, trachoma and leprosy. Importantly, this is evidence that stems from the supply and demand side of health services and shows that those on the front-lines can be producers of knowledge. In addition, this initiative successfully brought together 19 institutions from around the world, thereby building global engagement, partnerships and communities of practice, all of which highlights the convening power of SORT IT in galvanising the global agenda. A second cycle of SORT IT is planned to take place in Addis Ababa in March 2020, as a joint initiative between TDR, the Ethiopian Public Health Institute, the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp (Belgium) and various national and international partners. This new cycle will also focus on snake bite which has recently been added to the list of NTDs [8].

Hosted in Ethiopia, which is also home for the Africa Center for Disease Control (African Union), we hope this new SORT IT initiative will propel new

opportunities for mobilizing the much-needed resources to build, sustain and expand such operational research initiatives to other African countries. In the words of Emperor Haile Selassie, “*we must become bigger than we have been: more courageous, greater in spirit, larger in outlook.*”

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